

ISSUE BRIEF

Coordinating Enrollment Across School Sectors: An Overview of Common Enrollment Systems

INTRODUCTION

Families in many portfolio districts can choose from a variety of charter and district schools for their children.¹ But to make these choices, parents often must fill out multiple application forms and navigate schools that may have different requirements, deadlines, and selection preferences such as sibling attendance or proximity to the school. Once parents complete the applications and schools make offers, some families receive multiple offers and often hold on to them until the last minute, while other families receive few or no offers, remaining on waitlists well into the fall. Not only is this process difficult for families, it favors families with the time and knowledge to navigate its inherent complexities.

In order to make applying to a choice school less complicated, some cities are building common enrollment systems that streamline enrollment across all types of schools. These cities are adopting a transparent matching process that systematically assigns students to schools based on both school and student preferences. Families are asked to rank the schools they prefer for their child (regardless of whether the school is operated by the district or is a charter school) in a single application process. Families then receive a match that takes into account their preferences and the priorities and admission standards set by the schools in the city.

Proponents of common enrollment believe that it is more equitable for families and schools and can lead to a more predictable and

less tumultuous matching process overall. Common enrollment systems can also benefit cities and districts by eliminating the need to authenticate results from multiple charter lotteries, and by providing data on school demand throughout the city that might inform strategic decisions about managing the school supply. Even so, some detractors worry that centralized enrollment systems will erode the autonomy of schools and require administrative capacity that is rarely found in existing oversight agencies (typically school districts). Common enrollment also doesn't directly address the fact that most cities don't have enough high-quality seats to serve all of their students.

WHAT IS A COMMON ENROLLMENT SYSTEM?

The core features of a common enrollment system are straightforward:

1. Common dates across all participating schools are established for application submissions and match announcements.
2. Families submit one application form listing their school preferences for any public school in the city.
3. All matches are made through a common process and matching algorithm agreed upon by the district and the participating schools.
4. Students accept their match, or they appeal and re-enter the matching process to get another match.

1. The portfolio strategy is a continuous improvement model for districts that aims to dramatically affect student outcomes at scale. The strategy, built around seven key components, creates diverse options for families by opening new high-performing, autonomous schools, giving all schools control of budgeting and hiring, and holding schools accountable to common performance standards.

WHICH CITIES ARE OPERATING COMMON ENROLLMENT SYSTEMS?

To date, only Denver and New Orleans operate enrollment systems that include all four of these features and have the participation of nearly all of the charter and district schools in the jurisdiction. Washington, D.C., is launching a new system for September 2014 enrollment that covers almost all of the charter schools in the city as well as out-of-boundary enrollments in district high schools. For the 2014–15 school year, Newark will expand its existing district enrollment process to include charter schools.

Denver and New Orleans are unique in the wide range of schools covered by their common enrollment systems. With the exception of a few targeted alternative programs, all charter and district schools operating in Denver have participated in [SchoolChoice](#), the city’s common enrollment system, since 2012. In New Orleans, the Recovery School District (RSD) made the initial push for common enrollment. All charter and district schools in the RSD were required by state legislation to participate in the common enrollment system and have participated in [New Orleans Public School Enrollment](#) since 2012. Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) district schools, which operate in the same geographic region as the RSD, began voluntary participation in the fall 2013 enrollment season but opted out of the centralized transfer process. Most OPSB charter schools do not participate.

Most cities that offer school choice stop short of a full cross-sector common enrollment system. Charter and district schools may, for example, agree on a common timeline or materials to make the application process simpler for families, but they don’t share a matching process. While not a comprehensive common enrollment system, a common timeline and common application materials nevertheless can be important preliminary steps in moving a city toward common enrollment. Indeed, both Denver and schools affiliated with the RSD in New Orleans established common timelines and materials before they decided to pursue a more complete common enrollment system.

HOW CAN CITIES CUSTOMIZE COMMON ENROLLMENT SYSTEMS?

Cities pursuing common enrollment systems need to involve stakeholders in a series of important design questions. These questions include:

1. Will schools be allowed to declare priorities for certain types of students?
2. Will schools in high demand be allowed to carry waitlists?
3. How will students who miss the initial match (or who are dissatisfied with their match) be accommodated?
4. How will students who enroll or transfer schools midyear be placed in schools?
5. How will students with special learning needs be assigned to schools?

With the backing of state and local education leaders and advocates, district, charter sector, and school leaders in Denver and New Orleans took the better part of a year to answer these questions. Steering committees in each city included district leaders, select charter leaders, and community organization leaders who worked through key design questions. The charter leaders served as liaisons back to the larger charter community in their cities by relaying information, seeking feedback, and winning support for the system changes. The community leaders worked to garner support for the initiative and its implementation among families, the district, and charter school leaders. Both cities conducted several parent focus group sessions to solicit input on how to improve the application and enrollment process.

In Denver, where district and charter leaders had to win voluntary participation from charter schools, the stakeholders designed the system to respect existing school enrollment preferences. Schools maintained their individual priorities for students under the new system. In New Orleans, district and charter leaders pursued common enrollment to enforce greater fairness and equity in the system along with a more streamlined process for families. Since all schools in the RSD were required to participate in the initial

launch of common enrollment, leaders prioritized putting schools on common footing and ensuring equal access for all students. School priorities for students were the same across New Orleans, and the design questions focused on coming to agreement on sibling preferences, geographic catchment areas, and priorities for students at failing schools.

IMPACT TO DATE

In order to assess the full impact of these systems on the choice process, it is important to look at several factors, including levels of participation, equity of participation, demand by school quality and proximity to home, how often students were placed in their top choice, and rates of midyear transfers. While additional analyses need to be conducted in both cities to determine the long-term impact of these systems, the initial results are promising and provide information about how families are choosing schools and what factors could further improve the system, including better family information systems and a greater number of high-quality seats.

Results from the initial years of implementation in New Orleans (2012–13) show families are still learning how to best leverage the new enrollment system. Parents' demand for schools correlate highly with the state-published school performance scores, especially in the years (K–8) when parents have the greatest influence on schooling and extracurricular activities may be less influential in school selection. However, parents in the key transition years (kindergarten, 5th, 6th, and 9th grades), on average, listed only three choices, even though families are allowed to list up to eight school preferences—and listing the maximum gives the student the greatest chance of matching to a school in the primary matching round.

Some experts caution against relying on the percent of students receiving a top preference as an indicator of an enrollment system's success, arguing that these measures better reflect the supply of desirable schools rather than the matching system's efficiency. Nonetheless, fulfilling top preferences is important to families. In New Orleans' second year implementing the OneApp, 77 percent of kindergarten students, 69.9 percent of 9th grade students, and 88.3 percent of 5th and 6th grade students got their first-choice picks.²

In Denver, the common enrollment participation rate for the 2012–13 school year was 80 percent, 72 percent, and 60 percent of students in kindergarten, 6th, and 9th grades respectively.³ Seventy percent of all participating students were assigned to their first choice school, and 83 percent were assigned to one of their top three choices (early childhood education to 12th grade). As in New Orleans, families listed far fewer preferences than permitted, averaging 2.8 choices out of 5.⁴ But demand is following performance: family choices correlate with how well schools scored on student engagement, growth, and absolute performance. For example, of the top eight most-requested elementary schools, four were designated as “Distinguished,” two were designated as “Meets Expectations,” and three had not yet been in existence long enough to receive a rating. Conversely, of the eight least requested elementary schools, four were designated as “On Watch.”

Even with choices of schools that are performing at varying levels, many families still seek schools in their neighborhood. In Denver, two-thirds of requested schools were in a student's home region, and half of students selected only schools in their region. This works out well when neighborhood schools are high-performing, but it means that white and affluent students who live in neighborhoods with the city's high-performing schools tended to choose the higher-rated schools more often than their minority and low-income

2. CRPE analysis of data that was provided by RSD New Orleans.

3. Mary Klute, “Evaluation of Denver's SchoolChoice Process for the 2011-2012 School Year.” Report prepared for the SchoolChoice Transparency Committee at A+ Denver.

4. Ibid.

peers.⁵ Better enrollment systems in this case did not eliminate inequality when some neighborhoods have a shortage of strong schools.

COMMON ENROLLMENT IS JUST ONE PIECE OF THE PUZZLE

Streamlining the enrollment process for families can eliminate one important barrier to choice, but it will not remove all of them. For enrollment systems to function equitably, early experiences in Denver and New Orleans suggest that other issues may need to be addressed. For example, families need easy access to good information. Cities need to address low-performing schools by expanding high-performing schools and attracting a pipeline of quality operators. Transfer and expulsion practices may need to be coordinated across schools to treat students fairly. A transportation plan that requires schools to provide transportation throughout the district or within certain geographic zones may be needed to address accessibility problems.

Both Denver and New Orleans leaders worked with community organizations to develop family information systems, both online and in print, and launched major marketing campaigns to reach families. Both cities conduct an annual performance review cycle and replicate high-performing schools, as well as recruit and develop high-performing charter management organizations. In New Orleans, all RSD schools are required to provide transportation to students throughout the city, and Denver schools provide transportation within each of the city's four geographic zones.

5. Ibid.

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